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ABSTRACT

Despite recent emphasis on the communicative function attributions may serve, little is actually known about the reactions of observers to individuals' causal statements regarding their own or others' behavioral outcomes. To rule out perceived accuracy as an alternative explanation of the effects of concordance of causal understanding on interpersonal evaluations, 80 students participated in a study presumably concerned with jury decision making. The similarity, correctness, and importance of subjects' causal understandings were manipulated. The manipulation of importance consisted of telling subjects they would evaluate a real (high importance) or hypothetical (low importance) court case. After indicating on a 15-point scale the extent to which the individual in the case study was responsible for the accident described, subjects were told a second observer either agreed or disagreed with them, and that their judgments were consistent or inconsistent with previous subjects. Subjects then rated the observer-confederate. Results suggested that similarity of causal judgments and social correctness were successfully manipulated. No significant results were found for the check on the importance variable. The findings suggest that perceived social desirability or correctness of judgments cannot account for the effects of concordance of causal understanding. (JAC)

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Interpersonal Attraction: The Influence of Similarity, Perceived Correctness, and Importance of Causal Understanding

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Observers' Reactions to Attributors' Ascriptions of Causal Responsibility

Attribution theorists and researchers recently have begun to focus on the communicative role attributions may serve in interpersonal interactions. For example, Orvis, Kelley and Butler (1976) investigated attributional conflict in young couples and concluded that communication about divergent causal explanations is a common and important part of couples' interactions. Specifically, in the context of couples interaction, communicated attributions may be used to defend or justify one's behavior or to call into question the behavior of one's partner. In a similar vein, Weary (1979) has contended that individuals may ascribe causality for positive and negative outcomes associated with their behaviors in such a way that would avoid embarrassment and/or gain public approval.

Despite this recent emphasis on the communicative function attributions may serve, little actually is known about the reactions of observers to individuals' causal statements regarding their own or others' behavioral outcomes. This gap in the literature is particularly surprising since the topic of actor-observer differences in attributions has stimulated considerable interest among theorists and researchers (see Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Monson & Snyder, 1977).

Although it is not directly concerned with how observers respond to another's causal judgments, a substantial body of literature focuses on individuals' reactions to attitudes and beliefs of another. In general, investigators have found a strong positive relationship between perceived and real attitude similarity and interpersonal attraction. That is, we tend to evaluate others more positively to the degree that they express attitudes, opinions, or beliefs similar to our own. A need to be logical,

consistent and accurate in interpreting one's environment has been suggested as the motive underlying the similarity-attraction relationship.

It is interesting to note that satisfaction of an analogous motive has been considered to be a major goal of attributional processes (Harvey & Weary, 1981). Attributional theorists often assume that in order for people to enhance their feelings of control over their social worlds, they attempt to understand, organize, and make meaningful behavioral and environmental events. Based upon this reasoning, then, the expression by another of similar causal explanations for a given event, would provide an individual with consensual validation for his or her understanding of the event and might be expected to lead to the feeling of positive sentiment toward the other. The expression of dissimilar causal explanations for the event, however, would provide consensual invalidation and lead to the feeling of negative sentiment toward the other.

Two recent studies (Weary, Jordan, & Hill, 1982) tested this hypothesis regarding similarity of causal judgments. Specifically, these studies examined observers' reactions to others' causal attributions in situations where self-presentational concerns were minimal; the results of that research generally supported the hypothesis. However, it is possible that perceived accuracy of causal judgments rather than similarity determined the subjects' evaluations of the other participants in the studies. For example, if participants in the study generally agreed upon the causes of a particular event, an individual's dissimilar causal judgment might have been seen as particularly inaccurate and deviant, and for this reason might have evoked negative evaluations.

The purpose of this study was to rule out perceived accuracy as an alternative interpretation for the effects of concordance of causal under-

standing on interpersonal evaluations. We used an observer-observer paradigm in which observers made judgments regarding the causes of an ambiguous event. In order to manipulate directly the similarity of causal attribution, we used a confederate for the second observer. More specifically, in a study presumably concerned with jury decision making, subjects read from the perspective of jurors a description of an accident for which pretesting indicated that there was no general consensus regarding cause, and, therefore, no "correct" judgment. Subjects made causal judgments and subsequently learned that the attributions made by the second-observer, our confederate, were either similar or dissimilar to their own. Subjects also learned that their causal judgments were consistent or inconsistent with the causal judgments of previous participants. That is, they were "correct" or "incorrect" as determined by social consensus information.

Although social correctness or agreement with an abstract group of others, may provide some consensual validation, one would expect that influence to be relatively modest compared to the consensual validation provided by the expression of a similar causal judgment by a specific and salient other. Consequently, the principal prediction was a main effect of similarity such that observer-subjects in the similar judgment condition would evaluate the second observer more positively than observer-subjects in the dissimilar judgment condition. In addition, the effects of a third independent variable, perceived importance, of causal understanding were investigated. It was assumed that by increasing the importance of the experimental task, it would be possible to increase subjects' involvement and the importance of their causal judgments. Subjects were led to believe that the case summary they read described a real case that had involved litigation (high importance condition) or a hypothetical case

that had been developed for use in the experiment (low importance condition).

In summary, the study employed a between subjects design with three independent variables; we manipulated the similarity, correctness, and importance of subjects' causal understandings. The principal prediction was that there would be a main effect of similarity of causal judgment on subjects' evaluations of a second observer-participant. It was also predicted that the effects of similarity would be more pronounced in the high importance condition.

Procedure

Eighty students (52 males, 28 females) participated in a study presumably concerned with jury decision making. The manipulation of importance consisted of telling subjects that they would evaluate a real court case that had involved litigation (High Importance) or a hypothetical case that had been developed for use in the experiment (Low Importance). Each subject and confederate pair were told they would participate in separate but adjacent rooms "because the presence of others could subtly influence decisions or judgments." Subjects were given a booklet including a Case Summary and two questionnaires. The Case Summary described a situation in which several factors contributed to an accident. The case involved an individual who was making home improvements and whose borrowed truck rolled down a hill, causing some property damage and injuring a neighbor. Pretesting indicated that the causes of the described accident were ambiguous.

Observer-subjects indicated on 15-point scales the extent to which the individual described was personally responsible and the extent to which the accident was due to factors beyond his control. A second questionnaire was included to measure perceived importance of causal understanding. Observer-subjects learned that the attributions made by the second observer were

either similar or dissimilar to their own. The degree of similarity was actually manipulated by the experimenter. Subjects also learned that their judgments were either consistent (socially correct) or inconsistent (socially incorrect) with the causal judgments made by the majority of previous participants in the study. In the final phase of the study, all subjects completed a questionnaire which included manipulation check measures for similarity and correctness of causal judgments. The subject also rated the observer-confederate on four trait words chosen from Anderson's (1968) list on the basis of their positivity ratings.

Results:

Subjects' ratings on each of the manipulation checks were analyzed using ANOVAs (Similarity x Social Correctness x Importance). Results suggested that similarity of causal judgments ($F_{1,72}$ = 559.31, $p < .0001$) and Social Correctness ($F_{1,72}$ = 617.51, $p < .0001$) were successfully manipulated. No significant results were found for the check on the Importance variable. Subjects' ratings of the confederate on the trait words (likeable, pleasant, reasonable, friendly) were highly intercorrelated and consequently were summed and divided by four to yield a single evaluation index. A 2 (Similarity) x 2 (Social Correctness) x 2 (Importance) ANOVA of the evaluation index yielded a significant main effect for Similarity, $F_{1,72}$ = 106.76, $p < .0001$. The analysis also yielded a significant Similarity x Social Correctness x Importance interaction, $F_{1,72}$ = 6.27, $p < .02$. However, the results of pairwise comparisons indicated that similarity resulted in more positive evaluations of the other participant than did dissimilarity, regardless of the perceived social correctness or importance of causal judgments.

Discussion:

The findings were consistent with the notion that the expression of

similar causal explanations for an event provides individuals with consensual validation for their understanding of the event and leads to feelings of positive sentiment toward the other. The results also suggest that, in the present study, perceived social desirability or correctness of the judgments cannot account for the effects of concordance of causal understanding, since "correctness" was manipulated but did not influence subjects' evaluations of the second observer (confederate). It appears that under some conditions individuals like to find support for their causal view of an event, even when that view may be incorrect.

Accepting null effects as support for the prediction that social correctness would exert a relatively small effect on observer-subjects' evaluations may be questionable under some conditions; however, for two major reasons it seems defensible in the present study. First, there was independent evidence that the "correctness" variable was successfully manipulated. Second, the effects of similarity of causal judgment in this study were consistent with the results of previous studies. This convergence of results indicates that the dependent measures used in the present study were sensitive enough to detect effects of similarity of causal judgment at least with a specific other and attests to the relative importance of this variable.

In addition to the main effect of similarity, a two-way interaction between Importance and Similarity was predicted. Specifically, we anticipated that positive and negative evaluations of another would be more pronounced in the High Importance condition. Analysis of subjects' evaluations revealed no support for this predicted interaction. Examination of the Importance manipulation checks suggest that the manipulation of "importance" may have been unsuccessful. That is, subjects in both conditions indicated

that it was very important to them to understand the facts of the case. Two factors may have contributed to this lack of success. When introducing the experimental task, the experimenter pointed out that the focus of the study was individual decision making. In such a setting subjects may have been motivated to evaluate carefully the case presented before making judgments. It is also possible that in the context of a psychological experiment, it was important for subjects to understand all the facts presented and to evaluate them in a serious manner, whether the accident described was presented as a real situation or as a hypothetical event.

Might experimental demand account for the results obtained in this study? This study and the two preceding it involved different cover stories as justifications for the studies. Despite this difference, the pattern of results for all three studies were consistent with one another. Moreover, during debriefing interviews, subjects in the present study were unable to guess the experimental hypothesis and evidenced little suspicion. Experimental demand, then, seems an unlikely explanation for the results.

Might self-presentation concerns have influenced the results of this study? The literature suggests that under certain conditions, self-presentation considerations may influence what attributions are made by individuals (Orvis, Kelley, & Butler, 1976; Weary, 1979) and how observers react to such attributions. It appears unlikely that the experimental situation aroused self-presentation concerns. Subjects evaluated the accident and made their attributions for its causes privately; neither the experimenter nor the second observer were in the room. In addition, subjects were not anticipating communication or discussion of their causal judgments; communication of the attributions was designed to be incidental. Moreover, if self-presentation concerns had been aroused, one would have

expected the social correctness variable to have affected the results.

The present research extends work on the interpersonal implications of communicated causal attributions. Several authors have speculated that causal attributions play an important role in interpersonal evaluative activities (Orvis, Kelley, & Butler, 1976). The results of this study and the previous two studies (Weary, Jordan, & Hill, 1982) suggest that communicated attributions may provide consensual validation for individuals' causal understanding of an event, and may influence their interpersonal evaluative activities. It is important to note, however, that there was no attempt made in the present research to examine observers' reactions to another's purposefully communicated, self-presentational attributions (e.g., the type of attribution reported by Orvis, Kelley, & Butler, 1976). The extent to which concordance of causal understanding is important when individuals direct the communication of their causal judgments towards others is a question that requires further inquiry.

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Table 1

Means for the Measure of Positivity of

Second Observer

Importance of Causal Understanding	Similar Judgment		Dissimilar Judgment	
	Socially Correct	Socially Incorrect	Socially Correct	Socially Incorrect
High	8.05 (10)[a]	7.0 (10)[a]	5.05 (10)[b]	5.43 (10)[b]
Low	6.98 (10)[a]	7.08 (10)[a]	5.43 (10)[b]	4.95 (10)[b]

Note: The higher the mean, the more positive the evaluation. The numbers in parentheses indicate the numbers of subjects in each experimental condition. Means with common subscripts are not significantly different.